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Shangri-La and the Imperial Imagination in James Hilton's *Lost Horizon*

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (1933), Shangri-La has become a household term, applied to any peaceful idyll or retreat from the modern world. In the academic community, there is a growing consensus that Shangri-La is a purely unreal, imaginary place in the novel of a utopian genre. Nevertheless, how Shangri-La emerged and exists remains a mystery. Therefore, this essay explores how Hilton's Shangri-La came into being in two forms: an imagined paradise in the East with exotic chinoiserie, and the cultural Other to the West, which is governed by imperialism in the western imagination in the wake of global expansion and colonization. The literary strategies employed by James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* make Shangri-La an incarnation that epitomizes the imperial ambitions following the demise of the British Empire, with its concomitant economic, intellectual and cultural decline.

In 2001, China's State Council announced that Zhongdian County in Diqing Prefecture, Yunnan Province would be officially renamed as "Shangri-La" in recognition of its international reputation for cultural diversity and spectacular landscape. James Hilton (1900–1954) coined the name "Shangri-La" in his 1933 novel entitled *Lost Horizon*. It relates an adventure story about a light aircraft that was hijacked and forced to fly into the lofty Tibetan Himalayas. In May 1931, the four passengers on board – British consul Hugh Conway, the Vice-Consul Mallinson, an American named Barnard and a British missionary called Miss Brinklow – were unexpectedly taken to a forested valley called Blue Moon in a hidden mountaintop hideaway known as Shangri-La, seeking shelter at the nearby lamasery.

Etymologically, the English word "Shangri-La" originates from the Tibetan term "Shambhala"¹ which is a genuine kingdom in Tibetan Buddhism. Examining the inherent contradictions existing within *Lost Horizon*, Erlet Cater believes that "there is an inherent paradox in attempting to locate the utopia (or 'non-place') of Hilton's Shangri-La" (Cater 49). From the perspective of comparative literature studies, Kuan Zhang articulates the similarities between *Lost Horizon* and "The Peach Blossom Spring,"² a Chinese fable of the utopian genre (Zhang 88–89). By contrast, Jeffrey Mather argues that "Shangri-La is a utopia of sorts that appears to satisfy the desires of all the residents and visitors in different ways" (Mather 236–37). With regard to the utopian representation of Tibet, Hao Jin conceives of Shangri-La "as a place miraculously segregated from the outside world, where Westerners can establish a utopian society with the help of local Tibetans and Han Chinese" (Jin 2).

While there has been some critical discussion of Hilton's *Lost Horizon* in recent years, attention has been drawn to the literary tradition of utopian fiction. A large number of scholars have reached a growing consensus that Shangri-La is a purely imaginary place, "with its peacefulness and its utter

freedom from worldly cares”³ (Hilton 127). At first glance, Hilton’s Shangri-La appears to be an unreal, idyllic place, but it is by no means “a castle in the air.”

Shangri-La in *Lost Horizon* is a secret, remote location, where the passes are “terrifically high and unmapped” (199). Given the vagueness and uncertainty of its location, Mallinson complained to Conway, “How and why it [Shangri-La] came into existence we’ve no idea” (191). In the Epilogue, nevertheless, Hilton drops a hint for his readers: Rutherford, the narrator, described a chance encounter with an American explorer who was attempting to enter Tibet, “traveling then for some American geographic society” (201). When Rutherford requested for further details about the possibility for a valley and lamasery “to exist of the kind Conway described” (199), the American explorer replied evasively that “he wouldn’t call it impossible, but he thought it not very likely – on geographic grounds, at any rate” (Ibid). Starting from this clue, this essay attempts to elaborate on how Shangri-La has been conjured up by the imperial imagination. Shrouded in secrecy, Hilton’s vision of Shangri-La is less an idealized utopia than an empire colonized by Westerners from the outside world, which symbolizes the political and imperial ambitions of the western colonizers in the 1930s.

In an interview with Grant Uden, a well-known writer and book collector, Hilton was asked how *Lost Horizon* came to be written. He frankly admitted that he had been inspired by “a large amount of reading behind them [Tibet and its people]” (Uden 192), claiming that “much of what I have written about it [Shangri-La] is true” (Ibid). According to a study by John R. Hammond, the founder of the James Hilton Society, Hilton began conducting research on Tibet and read extensively to prepare fully for the novel which eventually became *Lost Horizon*. During the winter of 1932–1933, Hilton “spent many hours in the British Library absorbing accounts of Tibetan history and topography, soaking himself in the writings of explorers, geographers and adventurers” (Hammond 17), among which many writings by the American botanist and explorer Joseph Rock (1884–1962) in the 1920s and 1930s had a profound impact on him. More solid evidence of Rock’s influence on Hilton has been identified by Travis Klingberg, who points out that “the Daocheng County⁴ annals explain that the English writer James Hilton created the Shangri-La⁵ idea for his book *Lost Horizon* after consulting Rock’s research in Tibetan areas” (Klingberg 90). From 1929 to 1949, Rock made numerous attempts to explore the geography, culture, religion, and life in the Tibetan borderlands. To record his expeditions and excursions accurately, “Rock drew his own maps. He took compass bearings, measured altitudes, and noted the names of villages and landmarks. He transferred his findings to paper and sent sketches back to the National Geographic Society where his work was recognized by professional cartographers” (Aris 23). In February 1930, Rock published a lengthy article entitled “Seeking the Mountains of Mystery” in *The National Geographic Magazine*. The article began by stating that “To-day the map has no more secrets” (Rock 131), but he believed that this was simply a “parrot phrase” (Ibid), claiming that there were unexplored places in the Tibetan borderlands of China, which remained unknown to geographers and scientists in the early twentieth century. Based on his arduous travels in the Amnyi Machen Range,⁶ an Eastern extension of the Kunlun Mountains,⁷ Rock produced many photographs and maps of the route drawn by himself in order to locate the lamaseries, monasteries, and tribes he had visited.

All the facts suggest that the American explorer working for “some American geographic society,” whom Rutherford met in the Epilogue of *Lost Horizon*, may have been based on Joseph Rock. Moreover, Hilton’s Shangri-La bears a remarkable similarity to Rock’s depictions of the Tibetan frontier. For example, Shangri-La, in *Lost Horizon*, is a hidden place located in the Kunlun Mountains where Rock marked the Amnyi Machen Range in the article illustrated by his hand-drawn map (Rock 139). In his article published in *The National Geographic Magazine*, Rock described the terrain of the Tibetan frontier as a paradise on earth: “its tallest peak lifts its snow-white head, majestic as the Matterhorn. Here, in remote, almost inaccessible valleys, I found countless wild animals still unafraid of man, peaceful as in Eden” (Rock 131). Likewise, Shangri-La initially appeared to Conway and his companions as “an enclosed paradise” (94) in the novel: “The icy rampart of the Karakoram⁸ was now more striking than ever against the northern sky, which had become mouse-

colored and sinister; the peaks had a chill gleam, utterly majestic and remote, their very namelessness had dignity” (37).

Both Rock and Hilton describe Tibet as an Eastern paradise in their writings, and this is no coincidence. In the Bible, “the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the East” (Genesis, 2:8). With the global expansion and exploration by Westerners, the East has been romanticized and mythologized in Western literature since the late eighteenth century, and Tibet is no exception. For instance, in *Thalaba the Destroyer* (1801), an epic poem composed by Robert Southey, Thalaba discovered “the paradise of Aloadin” which was located on the Whang-ho (the Yellow River) in the Tartarian mountains lying to the west of China. To unveil the secrets about Tibet, a French missionary Évariste Régis Huc and his companion Joseph Gabet recorded their long journey to China in the two-volume book *Travels in Tartary, Thibet⁹ and China: 1844–1846*, in which Tibet was described as “a wild uncultivated region” (Huc and Gabet volume 2, 303). Ironically, Hilton himself never visited Tibet. Speaking of the reason why he set Shangri-La in Tibet, Hilton offered an ambiguous explanation, that “[o]bscure places and peoples have a great attraction for me, and Tibet is one of the few places on earth that is still comparatively inaccessible” (Uden 192).

The geographical obscurity and inaccessibility transformed the imagined Tibet in *Lost Horizon* into a mythical place. How, then, is Tibet represented geographically? In Edward Said’s view, “the earth is in effect one world, in which empty, uninhabited spaces virtually do not exist” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 7). Elaborating on the relationships between empire, geography, and culture, Said holds that “[t]erritory and possessions are at stake, geography and power” (Ibid). Far from the West geographically, nevertheless, Tibet was historically linked with Britain’s global expansion and colonization. Since the second half of the eighteenth century, Tibet has always been an appealing area for the British to explore.

In 1774, Warren Hastings, the Governor-general of Bengal, had sent George Bogle to investigate how to increase the trade between India and Tibet. On May 16, 1774, Hastings wrote a “Private Commission to Mr. Bogle,” officially appointing Bogle to undertake an extended survey of Tibet, including its animals, natural resources, manufacturing, geography, trade, and Tibetan people (Hasting 8–9). As the first British diplomat to visit Tibet, Bogle kept a diary during his journey and accomplished his mission in great detail. In 1775, Hastings sent Bogle’s journal to England, to be published. In 1777, John Stewart, the Judge Advocate of Bengal and a Fellow of the Royal Society, gave an interesting account of Bogle’s mission in a letter to Sir John Pringle, the President of the Royal Society. Stewart’s letter, which drew on Bogle’s journal and papers, was read out during a meeting of the Royal Society. On April 17, 1777, with the title “An Account of the Kingdom of Thibet,” Stewart’s letter was published in *Philosophical Transactions*. In the letter, Stewart depicted that the kingdom of Thibet “is a country of steep and inaccessible mountains, whose summits are crowned with eternal snow; they are intersected with deep vallies, through which pour numberless torrents that increase in their course, and at last, gaining the plains, lose themselves in the great rivers of Bengal” (Stewart 470). In 1778, Joseph Banks was elected the President of the Royal Society. Then “over the next 42 years, by exerting an authoritarian grip over the Society, Banks made science central to British culture” (Fara 57).

In the name of science, Britain began to realize the potential of the newly-discovered lands and promote the concept of global colonization. Nine years after Bogle’s mission, Hastings selected his young cousin, Samuel Turner, who had had a very successful career with the East India Company, to conduct a second deputation to Tibet in 1783. Following the route previously taken by Bogle, Turner recorded his tedious journey, giving details about his visit to the Teshoo Lama and the monastery, and making geographical, botanical, mineral, and scientific observations in Tibet. On his return, Turner delivered a report on his mission to Hastings. In 1880, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, written by Turner, was published, according to which, “Tibet . . . appears to be in a great measure incapable of culture. It exhibits only low rocky hills, without any visible vegetation, or extensive arid plains, both of the most stern and stubborn aspect, promising full as little as they produce” (Turner 216–217). As the sole English-language work about Tibet for more than half

a century, Turner's book exerted a powerful influence on British imperialism in Asia. Simultaneously, during the period of the half century 1784–1834, the East India Company gradually took control of a large part of Indian and Southeast Asia by its long-held trading privileges in the East.

There exists no clear evidence that Hilton had read these materials mentioned above, but he makes a brief reference to English missionaries in the novel: “[...] two English missionaries, traveling overland to Peking, crossed the ranges by an unnamed pass and had the extraordinary luck to arrive as calmly as if they were paying a call” (129). Therefore, it appears likely that Hilton drew on the historical records about the early British missions to Tibet when he immersed himself in extensive reading about Tibetan history and culture to prepare for the writing of *Lost Horizon*.

Like the British missionaries in Tibet in the late eighteenth century, shortly afterward, Westerners from other European countries flooded into Shangri-La in the name of “scientific exploration” (129) to legitimate the western expansion and colonization. As a matter of fact, “[s]cientific investigators are driven not only by their genuine fascination with nature, but also by other motives – power, money, fame” (Fara 17). The High Lama in Shangri-La was Father Perrault, a Luxembourger who was one of the four Capuchin friars to set out from Peking in 1719, seeking traces of Christianity in Tibet. As George Bogle and Samuel Turner did in Tibet, Perrault devoted himself to the study of the local plants and herbs: “during his first years here [Shangri-La] he labored with his hands like any other man, tilling his own garden, and learning from the inhabitants [the Tibetans] as well as teaching them” (120). In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx analyzes two garden metaphors in the western literary works—“a wild, primitive, or pre-lapsarian Eden [...], and a cultivated garden” (Marx 87). Perrault's garden in Shangri-La, of course, is the cultivated one, because it is “labored with his hands.” A cultivated garden bears some similarities to imperialism and colonization. In the letter to the British Prime Minister on February 10, 1815, Joseph Banks, the President of the Royal Society, wrote that “[t]he Political State of a Nation may be compared to a Tree, the Roots of which are the Farmers, the lower Branches the Retail Traders, the upper ones the Manufacturers, the Flowers & Fruit to the Gentry & Nobility” (Fara 47). Banks's letter reminds us of the social hierarchy within the political institution – the roots, lower branches and upper ones. Specifically, the kingdom of Tibet in *Lost Horizon* is “a Tree”: the Tibetan people in the valley of Shangri-La, who descend to the docile agrarian workers, servants and bearers of sedan chairs, are “the roots,” whereas the High Lama Perrault represents “the upper branches.”

Manipulated by the power of the rigid social hierarchy, “the valley civilization” (90) of Shangri-La is governed by Western culture. The lamasery is the only holy place in Shangri-La. With a music room boasting a large collection of European compositions and a library full of European books, “the lamas . . . held Western music in high esteem, particularly that of Mozart; they had a collection of all the great European compositions, and some were skilled executants on various instruments” (86). Moreover, “the lamas were of quite exceptional culture. Their taste in books was catholic, at any rate” (97). All of these were called “the spiritual treasure of the West” (120) by the High Lama Perrault. Presiding over the lamasery, the High Lama Perrault was *de facto* the ruler who dominated the mythical land, so “the folk of the valley and the monks themselves had no misgivings; they loved and obeyed him, and as years went on, came to venerate him also” (121).

In addition to employing the garden metaphor to represent the power politics of the social hierarchy, Hilton also takes full advantage of an overpowering gaze in his writings. One moonlit night, Conway set eyes on Shangri-La when he strolled out into the courtyard of the lamasery at the top of the mountain: “He [Conway] gazed over the edge into the blue-black emptiness. The drop was phantasmal; perhaps as much as a mile. He wondered if he would be allowed to descend it and inspect the valley civilization that had been talked of” (90). Michel Foucault examines the eye of power¹⁰ in Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, and deems that “[a]n inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over, and against, himself” (Foucault 155). In the novel, Mallinson continually complained that the enclosed Shangri-La was just like a “prison” and “a cage” (163), which can be regarded as a variant of the Panopticon. In terms of the eye of power, “[t]o gaze implies

more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder 208). Binary oppositions are projected in Conway’s gaze: high versus low, the center versus the periphery, the inspector Conway versus the native valley people to be inspected. As gazed by Conway, Shangri-La is objectified by the eye of power: it is the “lost and legendary treasures” (178) to the outsiders from the West.

The “lost and legendary treasures” have been hidden behind the mountains in Shangri-La. As to the coined English word “Shangri-La,” the suffix “La,” Hilton explains, “is Tibetan for mountain-pass” (47). Geographically, Tibet is a gateway to the interior of China and a destination for trade, which is significant in terms of combining Eastern and Western cultures. Alexander Murphy, an American politico-cultural geographer reiterates the power of geography within imperialism by arguing that “[g]eography’s development in the West was paralleled by the emergence of increasingly sophisticated geographical understandings in other parts of the world – most obviously in China . . . Indeed, the importance of factual geographical knowledge for the creation and maintenance of colonial empires is undeniable” (Murphy 18–19). During the course of global expansion, gold deposit is one of the economic powers for “the creation and maintenance of colonial empires.” With the political and imperial ambitions, Westerners start their voyages and travels around the world in order to find and steal gold out of greed.

Since the reign of Henry VII (1457–1509), Englishmen have hunted for an “El Dorado”¹¹ of their own. “The first recorded voyage from England to this end was in 1480, when a shipload of optimists set sail from Bristol to look for ‘the island of Brasylle in the west part of Ireland’” (Ferguson 4). In 1783 when Hasting appointed Samuel Turner to visit Tibet officially, one of Turner’s companions was Dr. Robert Saunders, a medical officer. Saunders recorded how the Westerners had discovered “many valuable ores and minerals in Thibet” (Saunders 95) in his article “Some Account of the Vegetable and Mineral Productions of Boutan and Thibet.” To the explorers from the West, of course, the most precious mineral is gold. “They find it [gold] in large quantities, and frequently very pure. In the form of gold-dust it is found in the beds of rivers, and at their several bendings, generally attached to small pieces of stone, with every appearance of its having been part of a larger mass” (Ibid). Communicated by Joseph Banks, Saunders’s article was first published in *Philosophical Transactions* in 1789, before being included in Samuel Turner’s book, *An Account of An Embassy to the Court of the Teshoo Lama in Tibet*, in 1800. When Turner and his team left Tibet, they took away gifts with them from the Lama, including “sheets of gilt leather, stamped with the black eagle of the Russian armorial; talents of gold and silver, and bulses of gold dust” (Turner xiii). As the historian Niall Ferguson points out, “[t]he [British] Empire had begun with the stealing of gold” (Ferguson 9).

Hidden in the remote mountains, Shangri-La was “very lucky to escape a gold rush¹²” (128), and “some vague story of gold” (129) spread in the valley. Eventually, a gold deposit was found by the High Lama Perrault, but it did not interest him. A second stranger from Europe named Henschell, an Austrian of noble birth, entered the valley of Blue Moon by accident. He envisaged Shangri-La as being built on the sound economic base of a clandestine gold trade, “by which the lamasery has ever since been able to obtain anything needful from the outer world” (128). Making payment in gold is a device to establish a sophisticated financial institution, which makes worldwide trade possible. In the seventeenth century, the Englishmen expanded the trade in the East by finding and stealing gold from all over the world. It is reported that “by the 1720s, the English [East India] company was overtaking its Dutch rival in terms of sales” (Ferguson 20) by monopolizing trade with India, Bengal, China, and other Asian countries in a whole range of commodities such as tea, silk, porcelain, and spices. The financial institution built by Henschell in Shangri-La is put to work in a similar fashion: “Henschell began our collections of Chinese art, as well as our library and musical acquisition. He made a remarkable journey to Peking and brought back the first consignment in the year 1809” (127–128).

The findings of the gold deposit in Shangri-La transformed not only the economy but also the local way of life in Tibet. The new imports from the outer world served to westernize Shangri-La considerably. For example, entering Shangri-La by accident, Conway and his companions were deeply impressed by Lama Chang, who “spoke perfect English and observed the social formalities of Bond

Street amidst the wilds of Tibet” (51). On his arrival at the lamasery, “the mechanics of Western hygiene [...] struck him [Conway] as exceedingly singular. The bath, for instance, in which he had recently luxuriated, had been of a delicate green porcelain, a product, according to inscription, of Akron, Ohio” (62). Even the whole lamasery was equipped with “a central heating plant, and modern plumbing” (187). Although Conway was exposed to an exotic milieu, the westernized facilities and familiar atmosphere in Shangri-La gave him “an agreeable sensation of being at home” (63).

A further example of the westernized lifestyle in Shangri-La is that cigars and coffee have never been in short supply. The four intruders into Shangri-La – Conway, Mallinson, Barnard and Miss Brinklow – were served with coffee and cigars while staying in the lamasery. The episode of dinner is salient here: “Chang had left them, Miss Brinklow had turned to her Tibetan grammar, and the three male exiles faced each other over coffee and cigars” (106). Throughout the novel, moreover, the English words “cigar” and “cigarettes” appear 19 times in total. David T. Courtwright, a specialist in drug history, views alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine as the three biggest drugs worldwide. In his book, *Forces of Habit*, Courtwright claims that “[t]he history of drugs is essentially a history of expansion, with technological change and capitalist enterprise providing most of the driving power” (Courtwright 65). That is to say, the global commerce in tobacco and caffeine was not accidental. Instead, it was a deliberate process driven by profits and imperial expansion. Initially cultivated in West Africa, tobacco was introduced into India, Java, Japan, and Iran by the Portuguese between about 1590 and 1610, after which tobacco use and cultivation spread “from India to Ceylon, from Iran to Central Asia, from Japan to Korea, from China to Tibet and Siberia, from Java to Malaysia to New Guinea. By 1620 tobacco was ... a global crop” (Courtwright 15). In the sixteenth century, Sir Walter Raleigh introduced tobacco into England from Virginia, and, by the late 1670s, “[t]he average weight of tobacco exports to England rose from 65,000 pounds a year to more than 20 million pounds” (Ibid). The English were the first European people to achieve genuine mass consumption of tobacco. Among the three big drugs, nevertheless, tobacco only ranks third, with caffeine in first place. As the most important caffeine plants in the world, coffee spread from Ethiopia, and “caught on in Europe in the second half of the seventeenth century” (Courtwright 19). In the eighteenth century, coffee became extremely popular in Britain. In the wake of globalization and colonization, the British people took full advantage of tobacco and coffee to create lucrative trade with other countries. “By the 1770s about 85% of British tobacco imports were in fact reexported and almost 94% of imported coffee was reexported” (Ferguson 13). In Ferguson’s view, “the [British] Empire, it might be said, was built on a huge sugar, caffeine and nicotine rush – a rush nearly everyone could experience” (Ibid).

David Courtwright argues that the history of drugs is ingrained in “the transoceanic commerce and empire building of the early modern period” (Courtwright 2). From his perspective of “the psychoactive revolution” (Ibid), it seems likely that cigars and coffee in Hilton’s Shangri-La were introduced or imported from the outside world. In the novel, Hilton gives a cue to his readers: the High Lama Perrault, who had unbelievably green fingers, devoted himself to “learning from the inhabitants [the Tibetans] as well as teaching them” (120). What Perrault taught the Tibetans to plant is unclear to the readers, but it would be possible that he introduced some imported psychoactive products, such as tobacco and caffeine, to the local people in Shangri-La. In addition, Henschell, who “devised the complicated system” (128) of the gold trade, made Shangri-La “a very fortunate community” (64). As one of the talented founders of Shangri-La, Henschell opened up trade with outsiders for the sake of security, so that the lamasery was “able to obtain anything needful from the outer world” (128): “none of the porters bringing books and art treasures should ever approach too closely; he made them leave their burdens a day’s journey outside, to be fetched afterward by our valley folk themselves. He even arranged for sentries to keep constant watch on the entrance to the defile” (Ibid). This trading artery, invented by Henschell, makes cigars and coffee accessible to Shangri-La.

Manipulated by the power politics in the social and economic spheres, including the rigid social hierarchy, gold trade, English language, westernized lifestyle, and psychoactive products, Shangri-La became a “colony of chance-sought strangers” (141). When appointed the successor by the High Lama, Conway naturally felt “himself master of Shangri-La” (178). The use of the English word “master”

clearly implies a binary opposition here – conquest versus subjection. In the tension between the conqueror and the conquered, master and slave, the literary and artistic representation of the Orient is the cultural Other in the western imagination. Placing himself in a position of the master, Conway examined how the valley population was governed, and gradually he discovered “[t]he notion of this strange culture pocket, hidden amongst unknown ranges, and ruled over by some vague kind of theocracy” (90). To a great extent, what Conway claims to be “some vague kind of theocracy” in Shangri-La can be interpreted as a mode of cultural discourse, with “supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles” (Said, *Orientalism* 2).

Paradoxically, Hilton blurs the location of Shangri-La, which is unmappable. “[L]ocated at a distance measurable in years rather than miles” (121), Shangri-La is a mythical place “shrouded in a little mystery” (4). Later, Lama Chang informs Conway and his companions that “you will not find Shangri-La marked on any [map]” (85). Yi-Fu Tuan, the Chinese-American geographer, analyses the essence of mythical space and place. He believes that “[m]ythical space is an intellectual construct. It can be very elaborate. Mythical space is also a response of feeling and imagination to fundamental human needs” (Tuan 99). This raises a thought-provoking question: what are the fundamental needs for Hilton’s writings about the mythical Shangri-La? The historical context in *Lost Horizon* is of great significance in shedding light on this question. According to Hammond, “[t]hroughout the time Hilton was researching and writing *Lost Horizon* war clouds were gathering ominously [...] It was a time of widespread unrest and violence, an awareness that civilized values were breaking down as Nazism, Fascism and anarchism were on the ascendant” (Hammond 87). In 1932, when Hilton was working on *Lost Horizon*, Germany left the Geneva Disarmament Conference and the British Union of Fascists was formed. On January 28 of that year, Japan attacked Shanghai for the first time. The conflict between China and Japan is known as “Shanghai War of 1932” or “Shanghai incident” (January 28 to March 3, 1932). As a matter of fact, there are numerous references to warfare in the novel. It is clear that Conway has been severely traumatized by the wars. Living in the valley of Blue Moon, “he was reminded of the War, for during heavy bombardments he had had the same comforting sensation that he had many lives, only one of which could be claimed by death” (148). To Conway, “the air-raids on London by the Germans were just nothing to what the Japs did to the native parts of Shanghai” (205). Considering the historical and social background of the novel, writing is clearly so therapeutic to Hilton himself that the mythical, imagined Shangri-La in the novel marks a retreat from the clamorous, hideous world characterized by the end of the First World War, and by the immense social and economic upheavals of the 1930s.

However, as Hilton writes in *Lost Horizon*, “there will be neither escape nor sanctuary” (177). Combining Eastern and Western cultures, Shangri-La has come into being in two forms: an imagined paradise in the East with exotic chinoiserie, and the cultural Other to the West. Coated with exotic items related to Chinese culture – the teas of China, Sung vases, ceramics, tapestries, lacquer, paper lanterns, and the well-designed garden with a lotus-pool – Shangri-La is governed by imperialism economically, ideologically, and culturally in the course of western colonization. In contrast to the outside world, which was full of vicissitudes in the 1930s, Shangri-La seemed to be the last hope for the colonizers from the West. For this reason, the High Lama Perrault issued a prophecy: “For those Dark Ages were not really so very dark – they were full of flickering lanterns, and even if the light had gone out of Europe altogether, there were other rays, literally from China to Peru, at which it could have been rekindled” (177). To the High Lama, Shangri-La was undoubtedly the ray that will rekindle the flickering flame. When dying, the High Lama Perrault did not select a local Tibetan as his successor. Instead, Perrault invited the Englishman Conway to take over his position, leaving the last words to him: “hidden behind the mountains in the valley of Blue Moon, [the treasures will be] preserved as by miracle for a new Renaissance” (178).

Following Perrault’s death, the question of how to revive the valley civilization in Shangri-La continued to be a lifetime mission for his English successor, Conway, but could he manage to fulfil his

mission? Perhaps the name of the valley, Blue Moon, suggested that it would be a Herculean task for him, because a “blue moon” might happen only once. Conway refused Perrault’s appointment and abandoned Shangri-La to the modern world. Later, suffering from amnesia, “[h]e was a wanderer between two worlds and must ever wander” (194) like the liminal personae, who was neither here nor there. In a nutshell, Conway was a person without an identity of his own. Vanishing like the “lost horizon,” he eventually disappeared. His final fate foreshadows the destiny of Shangri-La, with his departure from Shangri-la symbolizing the fact that “a new Renaissance” in Shangri-La is bound to be a shattered dream.

Now, Captain Mallinson’s puzzle about the existence of Shangri-La, mentioned at the beginning of the essay, can be solved. Based on the authentic historical materials and travel writings produced by explorers and adventurers coming from the West, Shangri-La is not a sheer fabrication, but a real-and-imagined empire that demonstrates the power politics in the encounter between East and West. On one hand, located far from the West, Shangri-La is portrayed as a “fertile paradise” (101) in the East, with exotic chinoiserie; on the other hand, in the European imagination, Shangri-La is the cultural Other to the West, which is governed by imperialism – the rigid social hierarchy, gold trade, English language, westernized lifestyle, and psychoactive products – in the wake of global expansion and colonization. The literary strategies employed by James Hilton in *Lost Horizon* make Shangri-La an incarnation that epitomizes the imperial ambitions following the demise of the British Empire, with its concomitant economic, intellectual and cultural decline.

Notes

1. Shambhala (香巴拉) is also spelled Shambala or Shambhalla.
2. “The Peach Blossom Spring”(《桃花源记》) is also translated as “Peach Blossom Shangri-La.” This fable was written by Tao Yuanming, a Chinese poet and politician during the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). It relates the accidental discovery of an ethereal utopia, where all of the residents lead a peaceful life in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world for centuries. The name “Peach Blossom Spring” has become a well-known Chinese term for utopia.
3. All page references to the text of *Lost Horizon* are to the Vintage Classics edition of the novel: Hilton, James. *Lost Horizon*. Vintage Books, 2015. Quotations from *Lost Horizon* are cited parenthetically within the text.
4. Daocheng County (稻城) is located in western Sichuan Province, China.
5. Shangri-La can also be spelled Shangrila.
6. Amnyi Machen (阿尼玛卿山) is revered by Tibetan Buddhists, as the highest peak of a mountain range of the same name in the southeast of Qinghai Province, China.
7. The Kunlun Mountains (昆仑山) are one of the longest mountain chains in Asia, running east through southern Xinjiang to Qinghai Province in China and forming the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau south of the Tarim Basin.
8. Karakoram is Chinese (Pinyin) Kunlun.
9. Thibet is the obsolete form of Tibet.
10. Michel Foucault elaborated how “the eye of power” was institutionalized and effectively inscribed in the social space during a conversation with Jean-Pierre Barou and Michelle Perrot.
11. El Dorado is the name of a fictitious, mythical country abounding in gold, used by the Spanish in the sixteenth century.
12. A gold rush was a rapid movement that inspired an inrush of miners, seeking their fortune, in the nineteenth century.

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